



UNIVERSITY
OF TAMPERE

This document has been downloaded from
TamPub – The Institutional Repository of University of Tampere

Publisher's version

The permanent address of the publication is
<http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:uta-201601151085>

Author(s):	Kallio, Kirsi Pauliina
Title:	Who is the subject of political action?
Year:	2014
Journal Title:	ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies
Vol and number:	13 : 3
Pages:	428-433
ISSN:	1492-9732
Discipline:	Social and economic geography; Other social sciences
School /Other Unit:	School of Management
Item Type:	Journal Article
Language:	en
URN:	URN:NBN:fi:uta-201601151085
URL:	http://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/issue/archive
Subject:	kriittinen maantiede; poliittinen maantiede; critical geography; political geography

All material supplied via TamPub is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorized user.



Who is the Subject of Political Action

Kirsi Pauliina Kallio¹

Space and Political Agency Research Group (SPARG)
University of Tampere/Academy of Finland
kirsipauliina.kallio@uta.fi

The overall aim of critical political geography has always been the problematization and politicization of matters not as yet understood or appreciated as politico-geographically relevant. Among other things, this work has succeeded in bringing many private, personal and mundane issues together with the more conventionally studied public, collective and formal ones. The scope of politics has thus widened and the places of the political have become more variable. In this work, the emphasis is usually on events, happenings, dynamics and power relations that can be pointed out from certain action. Less frequently are the subjects of this action set as the starting point or main target of enquiry. Yet, as Erik Ringmar (1996) aptly points out, it is only *as some-ones* that we can develop interests and take part *in some-things*. Professing this spirit, John Agnew (2003, 604) warns us from determining politics before anyone engages in it.

What these notions evince is that the concept of political agency comprises both the political subject and the political action—one does not exist apart from the other. Hence, the two form equally pertinent points of departure for critical political geographical analysis, producing diverse yet complementary approaches to any single case (see also Häkli and Kallio, 2013). The significance of the human subject in understanding political geographical phenomena has been noticed most evidently by feminist and post-colonial researchers (e.g. Kesby et al., 2006; Mitchell, 2007; Sharp, 2011). In their work, the subject's political dimensions are typically defined with relation to certain general yet asymmetric attributes, such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ableism, or the like, stressing the



intersubjective processes of identity construction and subject formation. Noticing subjectivity as a key concept, many have engaged with Butlerian theorization, presenting deliberate critique on the 'autonomous subject' and the underlying 'metaphysics of substance' (Heyes, 2003, 66; Wetherell, 2008).

This tradition provides fruitful grounds for a closer consideration of the political subject, as an intersubjectively recognized, negotiated, struggled and (dis)agreed *subjected subject* and a particular *subject of action* who may participate in politics in different ways and thus generate change. In Hannah Arendt's (1958, 180) terms the previous tells *what* the subject is—'qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings'—whereas the latter defines *who* the subject is, as a distinct political agent. Put together, this conceptualization provides a sophisticated conception of the political subject for the use of critical political geographical analysis. It is not, however, often employed.

In particular, empirically grounded research tends to approach political subjects rather in the what-meaning, paying attention to racialized, gendered, disabled, etc., subjects, and the related processes of subjectification, identity formation and struggle (Markell, 2003; Gambetti, 2005; Noble, 2009). It is much less common to discuss political agents as *who* they are, i.e. more similar to some people than others, still particularly situated persons with their unique experiences, feelings, thought and orientations. Reasons for this may be many but the one posed by Arendt (1958, 181) herself hits the nail on the head:

The manifestation of *who* the speaker and doer unexchangeably is, though it is plainly visible, retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression. The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a 'character' in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us.

Arendt's argument highlights that the *who*-side of subjectivity is generally sidestepped because it is much harder to discuss than the *what*-side, and hence also more difficult to study empirically. Finding out about gender and discussing the moments of its politicization is relatively easy if compared with exploring one's political role and stance in issues like ethics of care or practical orientalism, which both form ultimately important scenes for political geographical inquiry (e.g. Lawson, 2007; Simonsen, 2008).

At this point, someone may wish to ask why, indeed, should we be interested in 'who' the political agents are, in critical political geographical research. Isn't it enough if we are sensitive to the various attributes that define 'what' the subjects are in their spatio-temporal locations and situations, as these positions provide them with more and less powerful stances in their communities, societies and the transnational world? Doesn't this offer good enough starting points for taking the

political subject into account as someone who—by engaging in certain action in a particular way—develops and acts as a political agent? To enlighten my point, I present a brief illustration.

A great part of the world is familiar with Mohamed Bouazizi, often referred to as the trigger of the Tunisian Revolution that practically sparked off the wide-range developments of the Arab Spring at the turn of 2011. The transnational media has made many things about him widely discernible, including socio-economic status, religious conviction, gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, and so on. While some of these attributes have only occurred at the background of his story, others have been presented as explanatory to his action, together with the oppressive and unjust treatment that he received from the police. The question that I wish to present is: Do they explain why *he* presented the flaming protest as a reply to the frustrating conditions? Why didn't other people with a similar background and situation in life end up doing something as extraordinary? There are, apparently, thousands if not millions of people in Tunis and other North African countries who, more or less, shared and still share Mohamed's situation.

Similarly, consider the case of Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani girl who was attacked by the Taliban on her way from school in October 2012. She has been blogging actively at the *BBC* web pages for the past four years, since she was eleven years old. In her texts she has focused on the inequalities of girl- and womanhood in the present Pakistan, and the presentation of her own radical agency. People outside the Urdu speaking world may have taken notice of her during these years through translated writings and interviews, a documentary by *The New York Times*, her nomination for *The International Children's Peace Prize*, and the first *Pakistan National Youth Peace Prize* that she won in 2011, now carrying her name. Yet to me and probably many others, Malala Yousafzai started to exist after she was shot at in the school bus.

Also in this case, the question that arose to my mind is: Why her? Millions of girls are influenced by or gradually living under the Taliban rule in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the neighboring regions. Some of them are from more liberal families than others, with better opportunities to think beyond the dominant order, state their opinions and act independently, as compared with their coevals—including Malala whose father is a poet, school owner and an educational activist. Familial background thus surely provides a part of the explanation. But Malala's family is not the only politically aware and active one in Pakistan. Like Critelli and Willett's (2012) study on women's nongovernmental organizations in Lahore portrays, Pakistan has an active women's movement where women act as agents and activists in their own right, serving as a key democratic force committed to expanding women's rights and empowering women to claim their rights from early on. Yet not all women—or men—with liberal backgrounds and attitudes openly support or take part in this struggle, being aware of the risks related to such

activities. So why did Malala end up acting publically against the oppressive regime, for her gender and generation, in ways radical and daring?

To bring the two examples together, should we be content with the explanation that Mohamed and Malala just happened to perform their acts, and that anyone else *like* them could have acted in the same way? Or that it is not their actions per se that are exceptional and particular, but the *situations* in which they happened to perform them? If these responses do not seem convincing and sufficient for understanding Mohamed Bouazizi's and Malala Yousafzai's political agencies, we ought to seek ways to appreciate their political subjectivities as they reach beyond identity categories. Yet I should add straight away 'easily said'. I am, for instance, not able to say much more about the discussed cases without a deeper empirical engagement with them. The transnational media that I have used as my source of information so far does not provide sufficient materials for such analysis. That is, studying political subjectivity requires both in-depth theoretical and empirical work.

This approach, combining feminist geographical and Arendtian theorization, proposes that political agency cannot be defined or interpreted on a general level since every human being is socially constituted as a unique subject. The only way to understand and explain political events is thus deep engagement in contextual empirical research. Similar calls have been made recently by scholars involved in the ethics and politics of recognition debate. As one of them, Patchen Markell (2003) proposes the concept of acknowledgement as a better grasp of the uniqueness and multi-faceted intersubjective constitution of the subject, as compared to recognition. Drawing from Stanley Cavell's theorization he suggests:

The direct objective of acknowledgement is not the other, as in the case of recognition; it is, instead, something about the *self* [...] not fundamentally the acknowledgement of one's own *identity* [...] Rather, acknowledgement is directed at the basic conditions of one's own existence and activity, including, crucially, the *limits* of "identity" as a ground of action, limits which arise out of our constitutive vulnerability to the unpredictable reactions and responses of others. (Markell 2003, 35–36)

Responding to Arendt's concern about the subject who easily becomes masked by one's characteristics 'as we speak', Markell seeks access to subjectivity by diminishing the power of identity—"a coherent self-description that can serve as the ground of agency, guiding or determining what we are to do" (ibid., 36)—with an emphasis on the basic conditions of human existence that can be identified primarily from ourselves, and the spontaneity embedded in human interaction. He notes that we are constantly reminded about the limits of identity by both "utter strangers" and "the people we know best—the people whom we know not as character-types, but as deep, rich, tense, and messy lives in progress" (ibid.; cf. Katz, 2001, 711). Our banal, fine-grain knowledge about them, and their

knowledge about us, form as important a part in subjectivity formation as the more explicit identities that we are able to name, categorize and question.

Markell's conception of subjectivity and sociability provides one entry point to placing the political subject in a more central position in critical political geographical analysis (for a more thorough discussion see Häkli and Kallio, 2013). By marrying universalism and uniqueness of the subject differently from many prevailing theoretical approaches, it includes a fundamental rejection of the liberal self-sufficient subject without losing from sight the particularity of human subjectivity. In this approach, he comes close to Arendt's (2005, 128) idea of polis where the shared world can be talked *about* among its members but only from subjective positions. In such a world political human subjects are potentially unpredictable, intuitive and irrational—all characteristics needed for creating critical attitudes and promoting radical change.

To conclude, as the editor of this intervention series I take the liberty to peek into the following sections where my colleagues portray different kinds of human subject as analytic starting points in critical political geographical inquiry. Kuusisto-Arponen finds children in awkward situations as located in foreign cultures, unexpected familial settings and subordinate peer cultural positions, dealing with the everyday challenges of forced displacement as children, but also later in their adult life. In Prokkola's case it is the borderlands people whose political subjectivities emerge as multi-faceted and particular, best achieved in narratives that do not even strive for objective or straightforward portrayals but acknowledge the intersubjective plurality of human agency as a starting point. Ridanpää presents humor as a constitutive force to political subjectivities (in good and bad!), as well as a strategic and tactical tool that can be made use of in social struggles where the micro- and macro-political spheres of life intertwine. Martin's paper introduces the family as a *par excellence* unit of socialization and subject formation, simultaneously public and private, mundane and institutional, and calculable and experienced. The family thus approached appears as a constant arena of politics where different kinds of human, non-human and more-than-human political actors struggle. Burridge's no borders politics of mobility and migration hits the question of (in)equality in political subjectivity, making present the political agents who move (with better or worse odds) and wish to encourage or govern this movement (on more or less *de jure* grounds).

All interventions in this series thus involve a great number of human subjects who operate as prime motors of political action by acting for and against matters important to them, like Mohamed Bouazizi and Malala Yousafzai. In most cases they are not the players who seem politically most obvious, at least at the first sight. Yet the authors show that without their engagements, the events would not proceed as they do. It is therefore worth looking into *who* the actors are, in explicating the politics at play.

References

- Agnew, J. 2003. Contemporary political geography: intellectual heterodoxy and its dilemmas. *Political Geography* 22, 603-606.
- Arendt, H. 2005. *The Promise of Politics*. Edited and with an introduction by J. Krohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Arendt, H. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Critelli, F. and J. Willett. 2012. Struggle and hope: Challenging gender violence in Pakistan. *Critical Sociology* 38, 1-21.
- Gambetti, Z. 2005. The agent is the void! From the subjected subject to the subject of action, *Rethinking Marxism* 17, 425-437.
- Häkli, J. and K.P. Kallio. 2013. Subject, action and polis. *Progress in Human Geography*. EarlyView.
- Heyes, C. 2003. Can there be a queer politics of recognition? In, R. N. Fiore & H. L. Nelson (eds.), *Recognition, Responsibility, and Rights: Feminist Ethics and Social Theory*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 53-66.
- Katz, C. 2001. Vagabond capitalism and the necessity of social reproduction. *Antipode* 33, 709-728.
- Kesby, M, F. Gwanzura-Ottmoller and M. Chizororo. 2006. Theorizing other, 'other childhoods': issues emerging from work on HIV in urban and rural Zimbabwe. *Children's Geographies* 4, 185-202.
- Lawson, V. 2007. Geographies of care and responsibility. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97, 1-11.
- Markell, P. 2003. *Bound by Recognition*. Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ.
- Mitchell, K. 2007. Geographies of identity: The intimate cosmopolitan. *Progress in Human Geography* 31, 706-720.
- Noble, G. 2009. 'Countless acts of recognition': Young men, ethnicity and the messiness of identities in everyday life. *Social and Cultural Geography* 10, 875-891.
- Ringmar, E. 1996. *Identity, interest and action: A cultural explanation of Sweden's intervention in the Thirty Years War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sharp, J. 2011. A subaltern critical geopolitics of the "war on terror": postcolonial security in Tanzania. *Geoforum* 42, 297-305.
- Simonsen, K. 2008. Practice, narrative and the 'multicultural city': a Copenhagen Case. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 15, 145-158.
- Wetherell, M. 2008. Subjectivity or psycho-discursive practices? Investigating complex intersectional identities. *Subjectivity* 22, 73-81.